



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

Ontario Review

Volume 39 *Fall/Winter* 1993–94

Article 2

July 2014

Homage to N. (after Chekhov)

Daniel Halpern

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Halpern, Daniel (2014) "Homage to N. (after Chekhov)," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 39, Article 2.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol39/iss1/2>

For more information, please contact southerr@usfca.edu.

Homage to N.

—after Chekhov

DANIEL HALPERN

1.

She is the most beautiful woman in Moscow,
young, petulant, unpredictable,
proud and quite wise—a complete mystery to him.

N. understands in general how much there is
yet to grasp—about his young wife
and his life in the most general sense.

Yet he fails to take to heart the heartfelt advice
his father offers on the eve of his marriage:

“If loneliness is what you fear, marriage isn’t for you.”

Their first night together she brings him a chilled bottle
of mineral water with a preserved cherry at the bottom,
which they share, talking, touching each other
until first light brings the hotel to life,
and they drift deeply into sleep.

During the first years of their marriage,

N. goes nightly to see his young wife on stage.

They are so close in these days that when she delivers
a particularly winning line, he must summon restraint,
must somehow resist a powerful urge to stand up, turn,
and bow to the audience.

2.

N. is again enraged by his wife,
an actress inflated with an ambition
fettered to a modest talent.

To cool down

he calls on two acquaintances
the evening of her opening.

The first to secure savage reviews
in the morning papers,
and then on to her current lover

to borrow money to stage his new play
he's decided to call, "The Power of Harmonies."

3.

N. has always loved A.—
from their days in school,
their summers at the lake—
her long dark hair gathered
in a swirl atop her head
even as a young girl.
At twenty she marries Y.
and moves to an outlying district
of Taganrog, where they set up house:
a white-washed fence, a flock of cats;
they plant bright flowers
that spring forth each April.

A few years later

A. comes to N. and on his shoulder
begins to cry—she needs to talk,
to explain something important to her.
N. believes he will hear the sadness
of her life with Y., of her long-denied
feelings for N., harbored
for so endless a time.
She wipes her pretty eyes
on the wide, colorful scarf
wrapped around her shoulders,
her face alive, intense.
A. begins the intricate and animated story
of her love for D.

4.

N. has been plagued during the holiday season
with long nights of insomnia and bad dreams.
His dreams remain autobiographical, that is,
no product of the imagination. The weather's
been crisp, what they call seasonable,
and his diet has remained stable: dried fish
in the morning with eggs, greens at midday,
a little meat, well-cooked, potatoes and fried bread

at dinner. But the dreams continue nightly through the final march of days toward Christmas. He is short with his family, distracted by the wind or news in the papers from Moscow. What is it? Christmas Eve he awakes to a wind lashing the pines outside the house, from a dream in which his wife lay with her legs cut off below the knees and he, dressed in a white cassock, nursed her back with the sole intention of saving his own dark soul.

5.

Not a day goes by when N. doesn't pour himself a glass of cold milk, which he takes into his study, sits in his chair and places the glass on his work table. At the window he traps a plump spring fly and carries it cupped in his hands to the table, where he drops it into the milk. He returns to his chair and rings, always with an air of distraction, the silver bell that will summon the butler who has served him for thirty years. "What's that?" he asks of the old servant.

6.

After his marriage ends N. seems to his closest friends inconsolable—which is a mystery, really. He has complained of her for years, railed at her over dinner, constantly sought out the company of younger women—as he would put it, to inspire his work in the theater as well as his fiction. And then one day he meets S. in a lower-class bar in Zolotonosha Street. She's just shy of fifty, out of N.'s usual range, but they take up with each other, a liaison that lasts only a few months. When it ends shortly before Christmas, N. swings into a more jovial mood. The following spring he publishes a well-received collection of ghost tales.

7.

N. is in love. He's forty, she's seventeen. The weather no longer dictates the day. Clouds, sun, it's all the same to N.

She's a girl from a neighboring village who agrees to marriage. It's a bright day, their friends and family assemble, rings are exchanged. After the marriage they unlock the door to their new cottage, place a few birch logs in the fireplace and in the dark undress, meet under the woolen blanket spread over the bed. Is this his happiest moment? Her tears make stars of the fledgling firelight, her sad hair a shadow between them. Her impasse is agony for him—midnight, a fog on the air, the temperature going down. What's left to say, her love youthful miscalculation, the moment annulled, their life together yawning but briefly ahead, not much beyond the new day. He lifts the sheets, steps down into his wolf-skin slippers. He finds a blanket and goes off to sleep in a room at the back of the house.

8.

N. tells his students the first day of classes, "In the long run truth will triumph," which he knows to be untrue. It's his private nod, his way of sharing a few of life's hard knocks—to live behind the belief of a higher order, yet knowing to expect the worst.

9.

The snow this winter has been heavier than N. can remember. Since early fall he's been hounded by one illness after another. He's come to his country house to recover. The wind off the lake is relentless, hammers at his bedroom shutters where N. sits with a blanket across his knees reading his favorite novels from the 18th century. Suddenly he hears steps on the front porch, and then a light, rapid knocking at the door. He pulls back the curtain at the window and sees a young woman standing in the cold with a pale, linen suitcase.

He goes down the hall and opens the door.
 She tells him she arrived on the afternoon train from Moscow
 and walked the seven miles to N.'s house
 to look after the invalid. He fears her earnestness,
 the intensity that betrays her youthful eyes.
 He tells her there must be some mistake.
But no invalid lives here, he tells her,
 closing the door slightly and pulling back.
 The snow seems to be thickening and the light
 has drained completely from the afternoon.
 The wind howls over the lake, through the pine trees.
 N. understands what must be done, put protests.
 At last the young woman says that at any rate
 she'll stay the night. A day passes, two,
 and she goes on living there, keeping up
 the house, washing his clothes and sheets,
 cooking modestly on the country stove.
 As time goes by her temper becomes unbearable.
 Though cured—one might even say enjoying
 excellent health—N's very existence
 has been poisoned. One night he writes
 in the journal he keeps in his bedside table,
The sun shines, but in my soul darkness reigns.